



A CALL for improved school leadership

Evaluating the quality of one's work should not be limited to students and teachers; leaders also must be evaluated and encouraged to improve.

By Richard Halverson, Carolyn Kelley, and James Shaw

The Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) is a formative assessment that provides feedback to schools on the research-based leadership practices necessary to improve teaching and learning. Instead of focusing on an individual leader, CALL measures leadership practices in tasks carried out by actors across the school and embedded in school policies and practices. All administrators, teachers, and other instructional staff in a building take the CALL survey, and schools receive a customized action-plan detailing the key tasks for improvement.

The need for CALL

Schools need transformational leadership now more than ever. The public relies on schools as engines for increasing opportunity, well-being, and economic growth. Policy makers shape the delivery of these expectations through policies designed to improve teaching and learning, such as the Common Core State Standards, Response to Intervention, and Educator Effectiveness. Implementing these evolving initiatives and integrating new practices into the existing network of policies and procedures provides a considerable challenge for school leaders.

Principals also continue to be responsible for many other leadership tasks, including hiring and evaluating teachers and staff, professional development, support for students who struggle, community outreach, social services, budgets, and managing transportation, buildings, and grounds. Indeed, the scope of work to improve the conditions for teaching and learning in the complex organizational and policy environment of schools is too demanding to be carried out by a single individual (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Focusing solely on the principal's leadership role is likely to miss the important roles other formal and informal leaders play. Our research suggests that recognizing the

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distributed nature of leadership work is especially important for efforts to build organizational capacity for school improvement and educational reform. Simply assigning more tasks to formal school leaders without understanding how the completion of these tasks is distributed across the school won't provide sufficient guidance for school improvement.

Existing leadership tools focus narrowly on the work of an individual leader. New assessments of leadership are needed to support the development of organizational capacity for school improvement. We need tools that capture the degree to which leaders establish conditions to support the practices of others and create an organizational context to support reform efforts. We need the information reported in a straightforward way that describes the zone of proximal development for schools to take direct action toward improvement. And we need tools that assess leadership as well as individual leaders in schools. Such tools can guide educators in helping schools use policies that promote learning for all students.

What is CALL?

CALL is a tool developed by research funded by the U.S. Department of Education and carried out between 2009 and 2013. It supports formative assessment of school leadership practices that use feedback provided by all educators in a school to improve student learning. Over the past four years we tested CALL in more than 150 schools with thousands of educators. We validated primary school, secondary school, and district-level versions of CALL by comparing survey results with measures of school climate, leadership effectiveness, and student learning. We found that CALL identifies the strengths and weaknesses of school communities in ways that help educators focus attention on critical school improvement pathways. To our knowledge, CALL is the only such validated formative assessment of distributed leadership. The survey CALL is based on has over 100 questions and takes about 40 minutes to complete. All of the instructional staff and administrators in a school take the survey. It can be administered at any point in the school year. Some schools choose to take CALL in the fall to set the agenda for the year. Others prefer to take it in the spring so they can analyze data and incorporate CALL into summer planning processes for the next school year.

CALL is organized into five domains of leadership practice that focus on key pathways to leadership documented in our research as well as many others:

- Focus on learning;
- Monitoring teaching and learning;
- Building nested learning communities;
- Acquiring and allocating resources; and

- Establishing a safe and effective learning environment.

By focusing the survey on a range of leadership practices, we are able to measure and communicate to school leaders the specific pathways to improving educational practice as well as the organizational capacity to reform. The CALL survey generates an action plan that outlines key tasks a school can take to develop leadership capacity for school improvement.

CALL domains

The CALL survey considers how leaders create an integrated learning environment in the school by enacting and coordinating practices identified in the five key CALL domains by translating tasks into queries for educators respond to. The CALL development team designed each item to describe the range of expected practices in a school from 1 (a minimal enactment of the practice) to 5 (an optimal enactment). Thus educators can estimate not only where they rate but also can see the progression for what improved practices might look like. We invite interested readers to visit the CALL web site (www.leadershipforlearning.org) and to contact the authors for more detailed information about the survey design.

Domain #1: Focus on learning

Maintaining a focus on learning means leaders regularly engage the school community and staff in ongoing conversations to build a collective understanding about the patterns and problems of instruction and student learning. In addition, leaders are recognized as instructional leaders. School leaders engage in visible instructional leadership activities, such as learning walks or classroom visits, and leaders engage in the professional development activities they design.

CALL examines whether a school's vision of student learning has been translated into an integrated learning plan and whether leaders and teachers regularly discuss concrete examples of student work and instructional practice. It looks at whether special needs staff work together with classroom teachers to plan services for students, and wherever possible high-quality instructional services are provided in the context of the regular classroom. CALL examines the presence of key instructional practices such as differentiated instruction and Response to Intervention. CALL reminds leaders that focusing on learning for all students means increased focus on the needs of students who traditionally struggle most. While the survey was designed to be agnostic about a school's chosen instructional ideology, it does place a high value on collaboration and staff buy-in.

Domain #2: Monitoring teaching and learning

Monitoring teaching means creating routines for educators to observe how teaching practices are done and to collect data on the process and results of teaching. Monitoring learning means collecting data to assess and support the ways in which students are learning. And it means establishing practices that identify how and where student learning is breaking down, and building routines for educators to review student work and to communicate effectively with students about their learning.

Monitoring teaching and learning begins in the classroom with the formative evaluation of student learning. Leaders must provide structured opportunities, at grade-level, subject-area, or general faculty meetings, for teachers to share and reflect on their practices of providing feedback to students. Leaders also must coordinate interim, or benchmark, assessment practices so teachers can learn how and whether students are progressing through the curriculum. Interim assessment, delivered through commercial products (e.g. NWEA's Measures of Academic Progress) or self-designed common assessments, provide teachers feedback on student learning goal progress. Teachers carry out much of the work of formative feedback, and leaders are responsible for ensuring that there is a common language and common practices for educators to collect and share formative feedback information across the school.

Leaders must also attend to summative evaluation of student learning. In most schools, this requires that leaders meaningfully adapt assessment tools, such as standardized tests provided by the state and the district, to the instructional culture of the school. CALL measures how leaders help educators make sense of standardized test data by integrating results with other data on student and school performance to provide a more holistic profile of student learning. Leaders also create regular opportunities for educators to reflect on the results of summative assessments in order to recalibrate the school instructional program.

The summative evaluation process for teachers should have real consequences that result in improvement or reassignment to noninstructional tasks. Leaders must align the summative evaluation practices with the school's instructional goals and the educator's professional development plan.

Domain #3: Building professional community

The professional community among educators is at the heart of the school's capacity for improvement (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999). CALL measures a number of tasks that indicate the quality of a school's professional community, which requires a common context for practice. Effective leaders don't simply pile new initiatives on top of last year's efforts. They

work with educators to make sense of the new in terms of the old to build instructional program coherence. Professional development, curriculum design, and school improvement are designed to reflect this collective sense-making effort.

Educators are responsible for pursuing their own learning goals. The work of school leaders is to establish the resources and the direction to coordinate learning interests toward shared instructional goals. CALL measures how (and whether) the school has developed a long-term plan for individual and shared professional learning to meet key instructional priorities. Leaders design workshops and professional development sessions and use new media to create opportunities for educators to learn on their own time. Leaders are responsible for establishing practices to measure the results of professional learning in terms of changes in teaching practices and improvement in student learning.

Domain #4: Acquiring and allocating resources

Leaders must be able to access new sources of materials and time and to reorganize existing resources to meet new instructional needs (Kelley & Shaw, 2009; Odden, 2012; Smylie & Hart, 1999). CALL measures whether teachers with specialized skills are recruited to meet the specific learning needs of students and what supports are provided to help new teachers succeed. CALL captures how leaders organize time for instructional improvement and teacher collaboration. For example, it measures time provided for whole-school, grade-level, and subject-matter reflection, and provides feedback on whether allocated time is being used effectively.

In some schools, external experts, including district experts and external consultants, provide significant direction for school improvement. CALL measures how well these external experts support the vision of teaching and learning. Leaders also must coordinate and supervise processes to link families into the school community. CALL measures the frequency and quality of educator communication with families and whether the school uses new media to build multiple channels of communication with the community.

Domain #5: Maintaining a safe and effective learning environment

The CALL theory of action holds that a safe learning environment is the foundation for all instructional improvements in a school (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). CALL breaks down the different tasks associated with creating a safe learning environment for students into how leaders communicate clear, consistent, and enforced expectations for student behavior; create clean and safe spaces

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for learning; and develop safe havens for students who struggle.

CALL research

CALL was designed in collaboration with educators in elementary, middle, and high schools and district leaders. We tested the survey with 5,000 educators in 200 schools across the U.S. to understand how well CALL captured the variation in school leadership practices, how CALL results compared to measures of student achievement and school culture, how educators experienced the CALL survey, and how schools used the customized formative feedback reports.

A central goal of the CALL research project was to validate the survey against measures of student learning, school climate, and existing school leadership measures. In a study of 79 schools from Wisconsin, California, and Mississippi representing over 3,800 teachers and staff, researchers learned that the CALL survey was able to predict school performance on standardized test measures of student learning. Schools that scored highly on CALL had higher percentages of students scoring advanced in reading and math on state accountability assessments, even when controlling for student socioeconomic status. We found that human resource management and parent and community relations subdomains had the strongest correlation to student performance on standardized tests, and CALL researchers also found that higher levels of teacher interaction around issues of student learning are correlated with higher levels of student achievement.

CALL was developed through an iterative process to integrate data on use into the instrument design. We conducted a variety of usability studies to determine how users experienced the survey. Our research found that the survey's focus on distributed leadership practice led discussions away from principal effectiveness and toward a more comprehensive awareness of leadership practices.

CALL feedback

The CALL survey was validated as a measure of school leadership practice; we designed it as an information tool to support school improvement with feedback customized to the needs of each school. Schools receive reports that break down CALL results to the department/grade level to determine which groups of educators can serve as leaders or which need support for each of the CALL domains. Participating schools get research-based best practice guides to inform school improvement efforts. Focusing on distributed leadership practices, the reports avoid problems with negative feedback that can be taken personally by an individual leader.

Conclusion

Stakeholders demand accountability for student learning from public schools. Policy makers continue to press schools to apply new curriculum frameworks, evaluation practices, and instructional processes to make schools more efficient and effective. These policy pressures provide limited direction to school leaders on the specific leadership practices and improvement strategies that will enable them to manage pressing demands on schools in the face of increasing diversity and limited resources. Our research suggests that a focus on distributed instructional leadership is an important new avenue for directing school improvement. CALL's focus on distributed leadership appropriately distributes the weight of accountability pressure and school improvement as a shared burden on the entire school, rather than a crushing burden on the principal's shoulders. It enables schools to receive feedback on how to work together to improve as a community, rather than pointing fingers or avoiding blame. Our research brings attention to the important role of both the teacher and principal in improving teaching and learning. Evaluating individual school personnel is not enough to address the organizational conditions that limit the improvement of schools and student learning. Assessing the school organization's leadership capacity to address the unique learning needs of staff and students is a critical next step in supporting effective and equitable public schools. ■

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